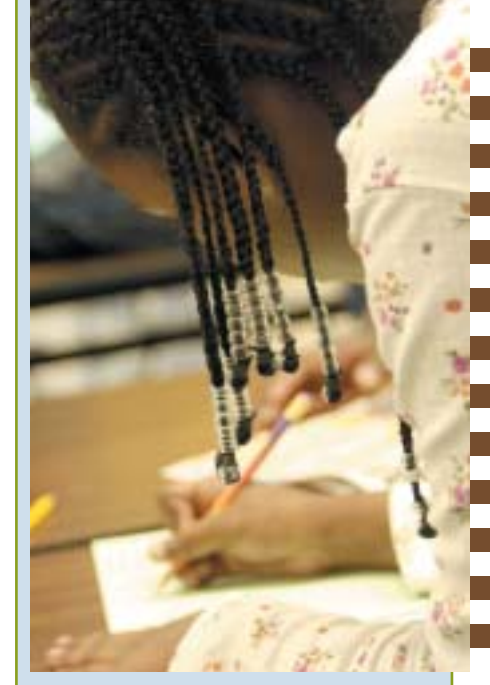


## Middle Start Gives Middle-Grades Students Another Chance for Success

IN A WING OF EAST MIDDLE SCHOOL, CLASSROOM DOORS OPEN ONTO A COMMONS AREA, WHERE A LIVELY BUNCH OF SEVENTH GRADERS ARE WORKING TOGETHER ON A SCIENCE EXPERIMENT. • HUDDLED IN GROUPS OF THREES, STUDENTS FILL CUPS WITH WARM WATER, CARRY THEM CAREFULLY ACROSS THE ROOM, AND THEN TEST THE CUPS' INSULATING ABILITY BY MEASURING THE WATER TEMPERATURE EVERY FEW MINUTES. • "OUR STUDENTS LOVE SCIENCE BECAUSE IT LETS THEM EXPLORE," SAID JANICE STURDIVANT, PRINCIPAL OF THE YPSILANTI, MICHIGAN, SCHOOL.



Exploration has become central to learning here not only for students but also for teachers, who together have been testing a model of comprehensive school reform.

Called Middle Start, the model is a bundle of how-to's for middle-grades educators—how to work together, better respond to students' learning needs, make decisions based on sound data, and become leaders for change.

"Middle Start was a blessing," said Sturdivant.

Since 1998, East's reading and math scores for seventh graders on the Michigan Educational Assessment Program (MEAP) have increased 14 percent—compared to gains of less than 1.5 percent at a nearby middle school.

"[We] could not have achieved all this without Middle Start," said Sturdivant. "Staff was ready for a movement."

### What Is Middle Start?

Middle Start often is called a "movement" by principals and teachers who have seen its success firsthand. In less than a decade, it has become the most popular comprehensive school reform model in Michigan and one of the top 20 most popular models in the United States.

Middle Start was launched by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation in 1994, initially targeting a handful of schools that serve economically disadvantaged students.

To strengthen student achievement, Middle Start's comprehensive program provides services in schools, such as coaching and professional development. Middle Start also develops local, regional, and state partnerships to sustain and extend schools' efforts. Guided by current research and practice, Middle Start schools create small learning communities where teachers work in teams and use student-focused instruction.

"These communities are part of an ever-burgeoning network of learning communities," said Leah Meyer Austin, a Kellogg Foundation program director. "This network works both inside and outside the school."

Leadership development targets the principal and teachers who form a leadership team, which uses data from school self-studies and meaningful student assessment to set educational priorities.

"There's now a change in the culture of the school itself," said Maureen Phillips, principal of Brethren Middle School in northern Michigan. "The collaboration among staff is amazing."

Phillips said teachers were initially hesitant to take on more planning time and responsibilities.

"I told them 'Give it 'til January,'" she said. "'If you don't like it, we'll go back.'"



But after just a couple of years, student academic achievement has risen significantly, pleasing not only teachers but also the district superintendent.

"Now we wouldn't go back," said Phillips. "It's just very powerful."

## Why the Middle Grades?

The rationale for focusing on middle grades is supported by research that points to ages 10 to 14 as the pivotal years determining young people's future success.

Only 6 of 10 eighth-grade students who have multiple risk factors such as poverty and low test scores graduate from high school. Many decide to drop out of school in the ninth grade.

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"The middle grades are the most vulnerable time in the educational life of a young person," said Aretha Marshall, Detroit Public Schools' executive director of school transformation.

"So many times students in middle schools get lost," said one teacher. "I love the idea of Middle Start because middle school is a kid's chance to start over." ➤

## Learn More About Middle Start



The Academy for Educational Development assists the Michigan Middle Start Partnership and serves as the National Middle Start Center.

The Center provides leadership and support for the Middle Start comprehensive reform program and for the development of regional Middle Start partnerships. See [www.middlestart.org](http://www.middlestart.org) or contact the Center at [info@middlestart.org](mailto:info@middlestart.org).



New American Schools (NAS) has received a grant from the Kellogg Foundation to help Middle Start

expand across the nation. With its affiliated Education Entrepreneurs Fund, NAS will help refine the model, maintain high quality, and build strong local and regional networks of support. See [www.naschools.org](http://www.naschools.org).



Middle Start upholds three goals developed by the National Forum to Accelerate Middle Grades Reform: academic excellence, developmental responsiveness, and social equity in middle-grades education. See [www.mgforum.org](http://www.mgforum.org).

## Middle Start Partners

The Michigan Middle Start Partnership includes the following organizations:

- Academy for Educational Development
- Central Michigan University / Michigan Schools in the Middle
- Connected Mathematics
- Detroit Public Schools / Department of School Transformation
- Eastern Michigan University
- Kalamazoo Regional Educational Service Agency
- W.K. Kellogg Foundation
- Michigan Coalition of Essential Schools
- Michigan League for Human Services
- Northern Michigan University / UP Center for Educational Development
- Center for Prevention Research and Development at the University of Illinois
- Center for Highly Interactive Computing in Education (hi-ce) at the University of Michigan
- Young Citizens, Inc.

## A Network of Support

➤ Since 1994, the Kellogg Foundation has worked with the Academy for Educational Development (AED) and other partners to establish Middle Start in Michigan and expand to other regions.

Although the Foundation's formal financial commitment to the initiative ended in August, Middle Start is sustaining its efforts in several ways.

A record number of schools are using Foundation funds and state-administered federal comprehensive school reform grants to pay for participation in the initiative.

In Michigan, where there are nearly 50 Foundation- and state-funded Middle Start schools, the initiative has created a statewide support network called the Michigan Middle Start Partnership. The Partnership provides coaching, leadership training, and other assistance to schools. It includes higher education institutions, regional education service agencies, advocacy and policy organizations, researchers, and state organizations. Middle Start has expanded to other states, including Arkansas, Louisiana, and Mississippi. In 2000, start-up grants from the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation helped explore the feasibility of establishing a regional Middle Start partnership in Kansas and Missouri.

On the national front, AED (which serves as the National Middle Start Center) and other partners are developing the Middle Start model for wider expansion. New American Schools—a business-led education nonprofit that has worked with other comprehensive models—will assist in building strong local, state, and regional support for middle-grades schools across the country.

## How Middle Start Works

Three key components of reform are central to Middle Start:

- Data-driven decisionmaking
- School leadership development
- Infrastructure of support

### Data-Driven Decisionmaking

When a school considers implementing Middle Start, the first step is a self-study of school performance measures, including student achievement; resources available to the school; and student, teacher, parent, and administrator attitudes about the school's effectiveness. The self-study is administered and analyzed by the Center for Prevention Research and Development at the University of Illinois.

Teachers want to do what the research says is going to help their kids learn. It's all about meeting their needs.

Self-study data have been valuable not only to the participating school, but also to the statewide initiative. Aggregate statewide data analyses have shown the collective impact of Middle Start's approach—most significantly, higher reading and math scores. Statewide data analyses also have revealed the unique needs and conditions in middle-grades schools.

Besides helping principals and leaders make better decisions at individual schools, the numbers have served to convince teachers, parents, and school board members of Middle Start's effectiveness.





To date, the Center for Prevention Research and Development has administered self-studies in more than 450 schools in Michigan, Arkansas, Louisiana, and Mississippi.

"The numbers are important to us," said Aretha Marshall of Detroit Public Schools. "I know of no other program where you have data that can be generated [during the same school year] when it's useful for the students who are there. That's been a distinct advantage for us."

Grayling Middle School in northern Michigan is typical, with 65 percent of its 240 students receiving free or reduced-cost lunches, and a significant percentage of students in special education.

Since first administering the self-study survey three years ago, school administrators report marked change.

"We're on an upward spiral," said Grayling's principal, Danielle Pummell.

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leadership in the building,  
you can forget about  
making change.**

For the first time in 10 years, the school improved its MEAP scores in every area. "This is a testament to what we have been working on," Pummell said.

"Teachers want to do what the research says is going to help their kids learn. It's all about meeting their needs."

Admitting that the self-study initially "sat on the shelf," Pummell says it now drives decisionmaking at the school.

"When we have a goal, we can look into that self-study for the data to support making a decision one way or another. So it's not an individual, the principal, or [someone else]—it's the data."

## School Leadership Development

A school seeking comprehensive improvement needs strong leadership in order to have long-term success.

"Leadership is key," said Nancy Fenton, co-director of Michigan Coalition of Essential Schools, another Middle Start partner. "If you don't have strong leadership in the building, you can forget about making change."

Besides developing leadership skills in principals, Middle Start has focused on other teachers who are part of a school's leadership team.

Team leaders participate in five leadership seminars per year, with each seminar building on previous seminars.

"A great respect was grown in my building toward the leadership team because teachers knew when they went to one of the seminars they were going to come back with research-based best practices," Pummell said.

## Infrastructure of Support

The notion of strong and sustaining partnerships—from school leadership teams, to teaching teams, to networks of supportive schools, coaches, state organizations, and higher education institutions—runs throughout Middle Start. In fact, the initiative is built on the assumption that strong partnerships are the infrastructure that will support middle-grades reform long after the Kellogg Foundation investment has ended.

Through the Michigan Middle Start Partnership, consultants from partner organizations and institutions provide staff development and leadership development. ➤



- They also visit schools to foster staff collaboration and encourage teachers to participate in teams, according to Steve Hoelscher, a former middle school principal who is now the Michigan Middle Start coordinator.

"We know that in a school, unless you have a consensus among the staff, school reform is not going anywhere," said Hoelscher. "So how do you work toward that?"

Middle Start's coaches serve as staff facilitators. By working in teams, teachers share common planning time and strategies. Data analyses show this collaborative method is the foundation of school and student improvement.

"Ours is a profession that is isolationist," said Pat Williams-Boyd, a former teacher who has been a Middle Start coach. "Sometimes as teachers, we go in and close our doors, and do the work [alone]. That's no longer the case."

Williams-Boyd provided technical assistance at East Middle School in Ypsilanti, where the principal calls her an "invaluable guide" and praises her efforts to help re-energize the school.

**If you called me up and said  
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again, would you select  
Middle Start as your model?'  
In a heartbeat, hands down,  
I would say yes.**

"[East] has less student truancy, better behavior, more attention in classes. Test scores have come up, and there are more parents involved in the school,"

said Williams-Boyd. "All of the kinds of things you want to see are happening there."

Like East, Grayling Middle School witnessed radical changes in the school ethos, said principal Danielle Pummell.

"Our staff is totally committed and empowered," she said. "We live it. We breathe it."

Pummell credits Middle Start for improving test scores, involving parents, and even helping the school achieve accreditation.

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# LESSONS LEARNED FROM MIDDLE START

THESE LESSONS MAY HAVE APPLICATION TO CURRENT AND FUTURE INITIATIVES.

- 1 MIDDLE START IS A MULTILAYERED LOCAL, STATE, AND NATIONAL INITIATIVE.** Homegrown solutions are appealing and may last longer over time, because they create leaders and problem-solvers who continue the work after the period of Foundation funding. At the same time, state and national capacity-building, policy education, and public engagement create an essential framework of support for continuous growth and improvement.
- 2 LEADERSHIP IS KEY** to school reform and public engagement, as well as policy change.
- 3 EACH IMPACT STRATEGY**—evaluation, leadership development, policy education, social marketing, and communications—is inextricably interdependent on the others. Middle Start's early development of an integrated action plan helped all partners to see how their roles contributed to the initiative's impact and to act accordingly.
- 4 RESEARCH AND EVALUATION ARE IMPORTANT** for more reasons than measuring success. Empirical data persuade skeptics and provide the best pathway to replication and sustainability.
- 5 A CHANGE PROCESS REQUIRES COACHING;** professional development; and an accessible infrastructure of technical assistance, financial support, amenable policies, and higher education involvement.
- 6 INITIATIVES OFFER AN OPPORTUNITY TO LEARN** lessons for philanthropy. Middle Start's grantmaking strategies have demonstrated the importance of planning grants, the need for technical assistance in addition to monetary resources, and the impact of modest and focused professional-development grants on student outcomes in the basic skills.

